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SUBJECT: Vietnam: Pirates in the Gulf of Thailand

1. (SBU) During a courtesy call on the Kien Giang provincial People's Committee, Ambassador Burghardt asked Chairman Bui Ngoc Suong and Vice Chairman Van Ha Phong for their views on reports of increasing maritime piracy in the Gulf of Thailand and the impact on Vietnamese fishermen. Noting that the majority of cases involved Cambodian criminal elements, Chairman Suong indicated that pirates from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have also been implicated in attacks on Vietnamese fishermen.

2. (SBU) According to the Chairman, there are no measures currently in place to effectively control piracy on the Gulf of Thailand. One important contributing factor has to do with the lack of a definitive maritime border between Vietnam and Cambodia. As a result, Vietnamese fishermen often stray into what Cambodian considers its waters in search of more profitable catches. These fishermen view the threat of piracy as a small price to pay, especially since most acts of piracy consist of holding fishing boats and their crews hostage while ransom demands are worked out with the families. While ransom demands might start as high as 15 million VND (USD\$1000), they can often be negotiated down to a more manageable 5 million VND (USD\$330). According to the Chairman, chances for greater enforcement from the Cambodian side seemed unlikely, as many of the pirates from across the border appear to be law enforcement officers from the coast guard, border guard, or fisheries management agency. Last year, Vietnamese forces arrested one Cambodian lieutenant and shot another (affiliations unknown) for acts of piracy.

3. (U) Kien Giang province, located in southwestern Vietnam, shares a 56-kilometer land border with Cambodia and a long history of maritime disputes in the Gulf of Thailand. Problems have likely been exacerbated recently due to increased fishing as the province seeks to actively develop its seafood production capabilities. Income generated from fishing accounts for 30 percent of Kien Giang's seafood products industry - an industry which generated over 2.5 billion VND (\$163 million USD) in revenue last year and represented 50 percent of all exports from the province. With Kien Giang alone accounting for 11 percent of Vietnam's total output in this sector, an increase in the incidents of maritime piracy may have the potential to threaten more than just the livelihoods of a few fishermen, but for now provincial officials seem resigned to accept the status quo.

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